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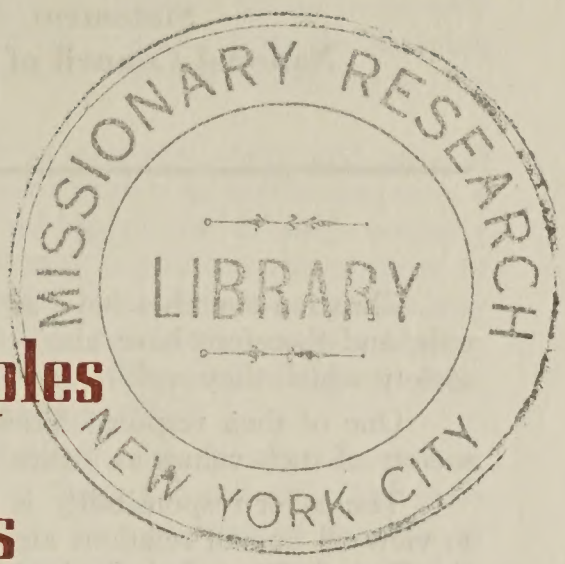

Christian Principles and Assumptions for Economic Life

Adopted by the General Board of the
National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.
September 15, 1954.

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Introduction

Christian churches have as a prime objective their ministry to individuals, and therefore have also a basic relationship and responsibility to the society which they seek to serve. Their role in that society has two aspects.

One of their responsibilities is the conservation and promotion in that society of such values as justice and freedom.

The other responsibility is prophetic, in the scriptural sense of trying to view all human relations and institutions in the light of the teachings of the Gospel. It involves leadership in the continuous struggle so to improve what is that it moves toward what ought to be, according to that standard. This means pointing out and trying to correct imperfections and abuses.

These roles — the conserving and the prophetic — are both essential. There is a complicating factor, however, in the position of our American society in the world today. We believe that from the Christian standpoint free democratic institutions are clearly superior to any form of totalitarianism. But our way of life has been challenged by totalitarian philosophies and practices, especially communism, which are competing with it for the loyalty of men around the world.

In this situation many of our people are inclined to discourage or neglect self-criticism; but self-criticism is a normal aspect of health and strength and a means of growth in a democracy. Any admission of fault or failure in our society may be falsely construed as giving aid and comfort to enemies, even as disloyal or subversive. The prophetic role of the Church thus becomes especially difficult.

Yet the churches dare not abandon the prophetic role. To do so would be to yield leadership for peace and freedom and justice and to disregard the churches' mandatory responsibility under the Gospel. When we cease to strive and speak for a society based upon these values, we give the impression that we have ceased to care about them.

The statement which follows is concerned with basic principles and assumptions in relation to economic life in the light of the teachings of the Gospel, together with the function of the churches and the attitude of individual Christians. It seeks to maintain an appropriate balance between the conserving and the prophetic roles of the Church.

Fundamental Religious and Ethical Assumptions

God as we know him through Christ is the God of history, of nations and peoples, as well as of individual souls. It is his will that his Kingdom be realized among men and that his lordship be acknowledged over all

principalities and powers, over every department of life, including economic institutions and practices. The Church is under a divine imperative to call all men – and especially its own members – to recognize the meaning of God's lordship over their economic activities. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth."

All the resources of the earth – such as land and water and mineral deposits, which under the laws of man become private or public property – are gifts of God, and every form of ownership or use of such property should be kept under such scrutiny that it may not distort the purpose of God's creation. God is the only absolute owner. Every Christian particularly should look upon all of his possessions, as well as his talents, as a trustee, and should use them in the light of his understanding of God's purpose for him. "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof."

All men are created in the image of God; and, though they are in history, sinful and rebellious as the slaves of their own self-will, God seeks to redeem them from their self-centeredness. Men experience freedom in the measure in which they are willing to become God's servants, and to allow God as revealed in Christ to become the center of their lives and the pattern of their living.

This teaching about man is the Christian basis for belief in the dignity and possibilities of all persons, whatever their status in the economic order. Persons uniquely combine body and spirit, and the needs of both should be emphasized in the Christian Church. That the material needs of men be met through their economic institutions and activities is one condition of their spiritual growth. "Give us this day our daily bread."

Men were made to love one another, and to live as members of a community that transcends all barriers of race or nation or class. All economic institutions and practices that tend to divide men because they enhance false pride, covetousness, and bitterness, or encourage laziness or the selfish use of power, stand under Christian moral judgment. The Church should seek to influence the development of economic life in such a way that economic institutions, policies, and practices are favorable to right relations between people. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Freedom is another basic value which enters into all human relations. Spiritual and cultural aspects of freedom are primary in society, and essential to its full development in accord with Christian principles. It is therefore important to consider the ways in which this freedom is influenced, for good or ill, by the institutions and practices of economic life. The basis of real freedom is expressed in the words: "We must obey God rather than men."

Economic institutions and activities should serve the whole man – body and spirit. A rising standard of living is desirable, but it may tend in a rich society to create wants and to over-emphasize the acquisition and enjoyment of material things in a way incompatible with Christian purpose. "Man shall not live by bread alone."

These fundamental principles should be represented and reflected in the working of any economic system. Economic institutions and activities should never become a law unto themselves. Their purpose is to serve human need. "You will know them by their fruits."

Certain Misconceptions

The churches in their teaching and behavior, however, have often obscured the fundamental principles we have stated above because of certain misconceptions, which can be appraised now more easily than in earlier times.

One of these misconceptions is the belief that some particular economic system is ordained by God. This belief has been applied to slavery and to feudalism; often also to the idea that the possession of wealth is a mark of the divine favor. Through the centuries even the Church has often taken a passive attitude toward the secular status quo simply because it exists, and therefore must exist by divine providence. Indeed the Christian tradition itself has been often thus interpreted. We now recognize that God's providence may work for preservation, modification, or displacement of some existing forms of economic institutions or for the creation of some new forms. Though God works within a changing order, there is no automatic progress in history. Change does not always mean progress. Sinful human choices go into the making of new social structures as well as into the maintenance of the old. To both new and old forms of economic life Christians should bring criticism or appreciation from minds made sensitive by God's spirit.

Another misconception is that in basic economic relationships benevolent intentions justify domination by those who have superior status and power. Benevolent intentions have been used with sincerity at one time or another to justify slavery, to give religious sanction to white supremacy and the continuance of imperialism, to prevent the poor from having education or the suffrage, or to discourage constructive land reform or the organization of labor. It is also true that sincerely benevolent intentions have been used to justify many impracticable or wrongful means and some mistaken goals of economic reform. The splintering of political and economic entities, the distribution of land into uneconomic units, or the use of intimidation or violence in the organizing efforts of any economic group should thus be questioned. It is quite as true of irresponsible economic power as of irresponsible political power, that such power tends to corrupt those who exercise it.

In some situations Christians have had the misconception that the one sure road to economic justice is the socialization of all the major means of production. During periods of exploitation of large classes of the population, and also in times of depression and unemployment, it was understandable that some Christians and others concerned about the welfare of the victims of the situation should regard every move toward increasing social control as an advance. Today we have enough knowledge of what happens under a thoroughgoing collectivism to realize that uncritical recourse to the state to remedy every evil creates its own evils. It may easily become a threat to freedom as well as to efficiency. The union of political and economic power is a dangerous road, whether it leads toward complete state control of economic life or toward control of the state by private centers of economic power. A wide distribution of centers of power and decision is important to the preservation of democratic freedom.

In contrast to the above misconception that socialization is an easy road to justice is another misconception held by some sincere Christians

that a maximum of individual economic freedom will by itself create the economic conditions that contribute to a good society. On the contrary, the weight of evidence shows that some use of government in relation to economic activities is essential to provide the environment in which human freedom can flourish.

Recognition and correction of these misconceptions have come both through the continuous working out of the meaning of the Christian faith and ethic and as a result of external events which the Church has had to recognize. Rapid and profound changes in recent centuries have made it difficult to regard any particular economic institutions as final or as ordained by God. Exploited or neglected classes and races have won new political and social power, challenging the claims of previous holders of such power. In turn, holders of newly won power often come to regard too lightly their social responsibilities. In some countries, as in our own, the possibilities of a combination of individual freedom and social responsibility have been encouragingly indicated and continue to be explored, along with the relationship between government and private or semi-private economic groups.

Applications of Ethical Principles in the Economic Order

The body of Christian teaching that has been developed in relation to economic institutions involves principles not easily harmonized, nor easily applied to concrete institutions, policies, and practices; and yet all of them have a rightful claim upon the Church and the Christian.

For example, in the present world situation there are real conflicts between such positive values as order and freedom, or order and justice, or justice and freedom. An economic system that neglects any one of those values will become intolerable. There is no completely "Christian economic system," suitable for all situations everywhere. It is however true that specific aspects and features of any economic system can be reviewed to determine the extent to which they are consistent with Christian teachings. Christians should be guided by their ethic to seek such adjustments of economic institutions and practices as will serve most fully the three positive values of justice and order and freedom.

We can suggest here only briefly some norms for guidance of Christians in their judgment of economic institutions and practices and in their personal decisions in their various occupations.

1. All ethical demands upon economic institutions must take account of the importance of efficiency and productivity in the satisfying of human needs, as essential marks of a sound economy which seeks the maximum welfare of the greatest number of people.

2. Christians should work for a situation wherein all have access at least to a minimum standard of living. Such a minimum should be sufficient to permit care of the health of all and for suitable protection of the weaker members of society, such as children, the sick, the aged, and the incapacitated. It should protect the able-bodied against hazards beyond their control.

3. All youth should have the right to equal opportunities to develop their capacities, in so far as society can provide them, through equal access to the means of health, education, and employment.

4. Economic institutions should be judged also by their impact upon the family – which involves standards of living, hours of labor, stability of employment, provision for housing, and the planning of cities, especially in relation to their industrial development and the elimination of blighted areas.

5. It is a clear Christian responsibility to work against those special forms of economic injustice that are expressed through racial and other group discrimination.

6. Every able-bodied adult has an obligation and the right to an opportunity to serve the community through work. He should take responsibility for supporting himself and his family. As an employee he has the same obligation to do an honest day's work as his employer has for paying a fair wage. Full recognition should be given to work of women in the home and to the useful forms of voluntary work that both men and women are called upon to perform apart from "the job" in the narrow sense. Large-scale unemployment, or long-continued unemployment for any considerable number of persons able and willing to work is intolerable. It ordinarily indicates defects in or relaxation of social and economic safeguards. All practicable safeguards should be provided and maintained.

7. Economic institutions should make constructive use of such motives as the desire for economic security, the desire to improve the economic conditions of one's family, the desire for wider scope for one's capacities, the desire for social approval; but under Christian influences these motives should be kept in harmony with concern for the welfare of the community and with the individual's sense of Christian vocation. The Church should keep under the strongest criticism any economic institutions and practices which emphasize self-interest above social responsibility and which develop a moral climate within which the most highly honored success is in acquiring money. It should encourage economic practices and institutions which foster relations of mutual aid and co-operation.

8. Since private ownership of many forms of property is a stimulus to increase production of goods and services, and a protection to personal freedom, wider ownership among our people should be encouraged. But there are fundamental moral differences between the ways of acquiring property as well as between the ways of using it. Property, and position, too, which give men great power over the lives and economic situations of others, require constant moral scrutiny.

9. Great contrasts between rich and poor in our society tend to destroy fellowship, to undermine equality of opportunity, and to undercut the political institutions of a responsible society. Those who benefit by such inequalities are easily self-deceived when they seek to justify their own privileges, just as others may deceive themselves by failing to recognize as envy their own feelings toward the more deserving or more fortunate.

Some inequalities of wealth and income are necessitated, in our society, both because of differences in service or function, and because of the great danger to freedom in trying to eliminate them

completely. Christians should disapprove inequalities beyond the limits set by a broad view of justice and of the well-being of society. There is an unresolved dilemma here. On the one hand, there is the Christian concern about injustice that may be involved in inequalities. On the other hand, there is the need of the incentive to initiative and productivity that is provided when income varies with contribution. Christian scrutiny should accept the validity of this experience but may well question many conventional appraisals of the value of a particular kind of contribution.

10. Economic institutions should not restrict political freedom of any person and their participation in the common life. Such freedom tends to maintain a balance between the necessary role of government at its various levels, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the activity of private business, labor unions, and many other types of voluntary organization.

11. Economic decisions are in increasing measure group decisions, involving often political as well as economic forms of organization. The Christian's vocation includes his finding his place within those political and economic movements which hold the greatest promise for the realization of the purposes indicated in this statement.

12. Christian responsibility for economic life must take into account also the needs of the whole world. The response to these needs involves the relation between production, distribution, and population. In some situations attention must be given to education for population control or to opportunities for migration; in others, to increase of productivity; and, in still others, to the elimination of artificial barriers to distribution. The relation between the obligation of Christians in the United States for preserving the health of economic institutions in their own country and their responsibility to people in the less favored countries often involves difficult moral problems. Every national policy should be viewed in relation to its consequences for the lives of people everywhere. Consideration must be given to its effect upon good relations between nations and upon the development of a peaceful world. We should practice tolerance toward the economic experiments of other peoples, in their exercise of freedom, though Christians will judge each experiment by the same basic moral standards that we apply to our own.

13. In recent generations there have been great movements of protest against unjust inherited privileges and institutional relationships. Christians may properly welcome the rise of such protests, as distinct from some of the methods used or the outcomes of many such movements. Sometimes movements of social protest have rejected the Church and the Christian faith and have developed ideologies, often based on illusory hopes, that have become for millions of people inadequate substitutes for religion. The Christian Church should do all that it can to disclose the illusions in these ideologies and to confront the world with the Gospel in its fullness; but at the same time it should in humility not forget that it has often obscured the radical ethical demands of the Gospel and that it shares responsibility for the resulting spiritual confusion.

The Contributions of the Church

The central contribution of the churches to the solution of economic problems is to help their members turn Christian principles into attitudes that motivate conduct. These attitudes grow out of faith in God's righteousness and love. Two attitudes should be emphasized: (1) love that takes the form of sensitive concern for the welfare of all persons and that seeks to raise the level of justice in economic institutions; (2) humility that comes when the Christian sees himself and his own social group under the judgment of God. This humility enables him to be critical of the tendencies in himself to seek power over others, to take more privilege for himself than is just, and to exaggerate the truth on his own side of any conflict of interest. One of the important signs of such humility is willingness to listen to others in a spirit of fairness.

The churches should seek also to develop among their members the idea of Christian vocation in all constructive work. The Church must make its influence felt in economic life chiefly through the decisions of its laymen in their various occupations — as employers, as employees, as producers and consumers, and as citizens. The Christian is called to commit himself to God's purpose in every area of his life, and usually there is no more important area than his way of making a living. Each Christian needs to seek distinctive Christian guidance for his role in the economic order.

The churches themselves own property, invest funds, and employ labor. Often their policies have been no better than those which the Church condemns in the secular world. Its divisions often reflect and seem to give a religious sanction to the social divisions that are characteristic of society at large. In all these matters judgment should "begin at the house of God."

The Church recognizes that there are technical elements in most controversial issues which call for special knowledge and experience; that important relevant factors are often difficult to ascertain, especially in the confusion of propaganda; and that many essential elements should be blended in judgments that the Church or its members make about economic issues. This blending involves constant correction by those whose training and experience qualify them to speak on specific aspects of any problem; as well as by effective representation of all the social groups upon which economic decisions may have quite different effects.

Thus no one of these requisites can be omitted: Christian objectives, standards, and attitudes; technical knowledge; seasoned judgment based upon actual participation in economic activities; and awareness of the human effect of any policy upon all groups of people as those groups themselves see it. All these elements must enter into the creation of the mind of the Church when the members of Christ's body seek to relate its fundamental faith and ethic to the concrete and complex economic issues in the contemporary world.

Department of the Church and Economic Life, Division of Christian Life and Work, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 297 Fourth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y., Published by P & D Department, 120 E. 23rd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

C06-68 2920 Price: 10 Cents Printed in U.S.A.